

the UNSEEN

# ELEANOR

book 1



a novel by  
**johnny worthen**

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Provo, Utah

## CHAPTER ONE

The coyote circled the campsite in ever tightening spirals. There were three people there; a man, a woman, and a child. The child was out of the box. The big ones, the adults, were still inside talking and clattering, making smells of bacon, milk, and pepper. The coyote discerned each distinct odor over the lingering sulfurous steam.

The child was female, seven summers at most. By size, she was at the upper end of what the coyote could bring down. It could kill the girl because the girl was a child. But that was dumb thinking. The big ones inside would not abandon the girl. Even dead.

It was not so hungry or foolish to actually attack the girl, not so hungry at all. A poacher had shot a moose from his car and the animal had died not far from here. There was meat there for a week at least. Enough to fatten up.

The coyote had been a coyote for so long that it hardly remembered not being a coyote. It did not want to forget its family. It was losing its history, its identity. It wanted to be safe, needed to survive, but it was time to take to a chance.

The coyote watched the girl skip through the morning summer sunlight chanting a song it had heard before but couldn't remember.

It watched the girl wander out of the camp, collecting pinecones in her arms until they overflowed and she knelt to gather them again.

From the white camper drifted the smell of frying eggs. Camper. Yes. The thing was called a camper. The coyote remembered.

The little girl grew still and peered into the trees.

The coyote froze, letting its fur hide it in the undergrowth. It was tan, tawny, and copper-streaked. The blend made it nearly invisible against the forest background.

"Hello?" said the little girl.

The coyote remained motionless. It watched the girl with glassy, unblinking eyes and waited.

She had auburn hair, not wholly unlike the coyote's coat. Clean skin. Healthy size and weight. The child shrugged, giggled at something only she knew, and trotted off after more pinecones.

“Celeste,” came a voice from the camper. “Don’t go far. It’s almost breakfast.”

“Kay,” she called back.

When her back was toward it, the coyote padded closer. The girl turned around.

The coyote was out in the open but froze nonetheless.

“Doggy!” she cried. The coyote held still.

The girl took a tentative step forward. Her attention diverted, the pinecones spilled out over the ground again. The clatter sent the coyote bolting for cover.

“Doggy!” called the girl. “Doggy come back.”

She loped to the bush where the coyote had run, but it was already gone.

It circled the campsite, head low, and watched the girl from a distance.

“Celeste, come on back,” said a woman in the camper.

Shading her eyes with her hands, the girl searched for the coyote, turning all the way around. Finally, she shrugged her shoulders in an exaggerated gesture, a mimic of something she must have seen and hadn’t yet perfected. Then she skipped back to the campsite.

Once out of the trees and in the clearing by the picnic table, she caught sight of the coyote behind an iron barbecue stand. She squatted down and held out her hand as if offering food.

Unmoving, the coyote watched her.

The girl shuffled forward in a squat, her hand outstretched.

Taking in every movement, studying every feature, remembering how it was done, the coyote studied the little girl. It smelled the air, listened for danger, and then took a cautious step toward Celeste.

The girl giggled, and instead of scaring the coyote, the sound cheered it.

The coyote was out of cover, ten feet from the camper. It knew it was in pistol range if a gun was at hand, and there was always a gun at hand.

“Doggy, come here. I won’t hurt you.”

It was not trust that moved the coyote closer to the girl—it did not even

remember what that was. It was not hunger or fear, the only motivations that had moved it for over forty years. No, it was something unique and unnatural that stirred it. It was a yearning to take a chance at rejoining a world it had left nearly half a century before, a world that had taken everything from it. It was crazy madness, and the coyote felt every bit of that insanity as it defied its instincts, and crept closer to the squatting girl.

“Nice doggy,” she cooed. “I’m just going to pet you. I’ll be real careful.”

Tense as a spring, its weight shifted for a sudden dash, the coyote stretched its neck and sniffed the girl’s fingers.

The girl shuffled closer.

The coyote twitched where its animal instinct to run wrestled with the ludicrous longing to stay.

The girl touched the coyote’s head and scratched between its ears. Though the coyote held her gaze in its cold unblinking stare, she was not afraid.

“You’re nice,” she said. “You don’t bark or anything.”

The coyote moved closer.

Celeste laughed.

The coyote lifted its muzzle up to her face and sniffed.

Celeste sniffed back. She rubbed her nose against the coyote’s and giggled again.

The coyote inhaled the girl’s breath, tasting her lungs, her heat, her blood.

Celeste threw her arms around the coyote and pulled it toward her in an ardent embrace. The sudden capture surprised the coyote and it yipped.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Celeste said, letting it go. “Sometimes I hug too hard. I know. I’m sorry.”

“Celeste dear, what was that?” called the woman. “Come in now. It’s breakfast.”

Celeste looked over her shoulder to the camper and stood up.

“I’ve got to go now,” she said. “I’ll bring you some bacon after brunch, okay?” She started to go.

The coyote yipped again, and she stopped.

Celeste turned to face the coyote, her hands on her hips in a severe gesture of mimicked impatience.

The coyote sprung on her. It slammed her to the ground and pinned her beneath its spindly legs.

Celeste shrieked.

The coyote bent over her face, showed its teeth, and growled.

The camper fell silent for an instant, then burst into noise—plates clattering, doors flung open.

The coyote lowered its head over Celeste's face. The girl stared terrified at the animal. For a long moment they regarded each other in the depths of each other's eyes. Fear and wonder, despair and hope mingling in the potential of the moment.

Then the coyote opened its mouth and shot out its tongue. It licked Celeste from her chin to her forehead in a rough, dry kiss.

Celeste squealed in delight and surprise.

“Celeste!” said a man in panicked voice. “Don't move, honey.”

The man had a gun. The coyote heard it, smelled it, saw it.

He sidestepped out of the camper and circled the pair on the ground. He was looking for a clear shot. Celeste squirmed out from under the animal. The woman cried, the man raised his gun.

“No, Daddy!” cried Celeste.

“It'll bite you, sweetie.”

“No, it's nice.”

Celeste ran to the coyote and threw her arms around its neck. “See?” she said.

The man half-lowered the gun.

The coyote tensed and kept its eyes on the man and the shining steel in his hand. Celeste stroked the animal's fur. The coyote watched the man.

The man pursed his lips and glanced at his wife.

That was all it could hope for. The coyote bolted. It ran low and fast under the picnic table, across the campsite, and disappeared into the forest.



Sprinting for its life, it listened for the gun, expecting to feel the burning bullet in its haunches, but it did not come. The man did not shoot.

Two hours and two circuitous miles later, the coyote approached the dead moose. It could still taste the little girl in its mouth, smell her breath, remember her hair, her laugh, and her eyes.

It rushed at the vultures, snapped at them and snarled until they all fled. Then it ravenously set upon the moose meat. It needed to put on weight. Celeste had been at least forty pounds heavier than the coyote.

## CHAPTER TWO

Eleanor Anders sat in her seat at the back of the class. She always sat away from the other students. She was shy to the point of being unfriendly, but didn't mind. Couldn't mind.

The school held grades kindergarten through twelfth. It had a total student body of less than three hundred fifty students. Most of them were bused to town, drawn from over a thousand square miles of Wyoming wilderness. Eleanor had visited every classroom since she joined the school in the first grade. She knew everyone, and everyone in the school knew of her.

The Wyoming summer was still bright and verdant through the window, and Eleanor watched birds move through the sky and listened to distant passing traffic while Mrs. Hart droned on about American expansionism and the destruction of the Noble Indian.

The lunchroom was preparing chicken-fried steak with cream gravy. It was still three hours away, but they'd opened the cases to thaw it out. The smell was unpleasant because Eleanor despised that meal. The meat was inconsistent; sometimes mostly beef, sometimes mostly pork or chicken or kangaroo, but always the parts of the animal that were usually thrown away.

"American Indians lived off the land, taking only what they needed," Mrs. Hart said. "They didn't hunt for sport or waste what they killed. They were peaceful stewards of the land. They used every part of every animal."

Something was happening in the principal's office. Eleanor didn't know what it was, but it was different than the usual sounds of conversation, phone calls, and paper shuffling she'd memorized over the last half month. The office was in the middle of the building, servicing the three nominal schools of Jamesford Elementary in the west wing, Jamesford Middle in the north, and Jamesford High in the east.

"The Indians lived in peace with their neighboring tribes," Mrs. Hart went on. "They came together to fight the invading whites as a unified nation, much like the European powers did in the first and second World Wars."

Eleanor wondered where Mrs. Hart got her information or if she'd even gone beyond her own imaginings for this lecture. Mrs. Hart's idea of the Noble Savage was drawn from a Kevin Costner movie and childhood fantasies. Eleanor knew what the Indians were, and they were not noble.

Eleanor thought that Mrs. Hart was playing on the proximity of the Shoshone reservation which lay only twenty miles down the road. They had their own schools, and occasionally the Jamesford Cowboys and the Wild River Shoshone Braves would square off for a football or baseball game, or, most importantly, a rodeo. These meetings were friendly and good natured. The teachers always made sure of it.

From the principal's office, Eleanor thought she heard a name. Her heart stuttered, and she felt her face blush. She put her head down in her arms to hide it. She concentrated on the office, pushing out the smells and Mrs. Hart's ignorant speech.

Had she heard that? Had she heard the name David? David Venn?

"Eleanor," Mrs. Hart said. "Am I boring you?"

She ignored her teacher and strained to hear outside the room.

"Eleanor Anders," Mrs. Hart said sharply. "I'm talking to you."

She listened to approaching steps in the hallway.

Eleanor kept her face down. Mrs. Hart should ignore her as she usually did. Why now, now of all times, was she so interested in calling attention to her? Eleanor remained still, a rabbit in the open—tense as taught sinew, still as a stone.

She heard Mrs. Hart step out from behind her lectern and move toward her seat. The class fell into a sudden anticipatory silence; papers were stilled, texting was paused.

The classroom door swung open.

"Mrs. Hart?" said a man at the door.

Two steps from Eleanor she stopped.

"Yes, Principal Curtz?" she said warmly. The class turned to the door. Eleanor felt their eyes pull off her like a weight from her back.

"I have a new student for you," he said. "Or rather, an old student."

Mutterings in the class.

"David Venn is back with us," he said. "You remember him, don't you?"

"Of course, I do," she lied. Mrs. Hart was not here when David last attended

the school. She'd arrived when Eleanor was in seventh grade. David had left in third. But what was truth to this woman?

"Welcome, David," Mrs. Hart said. "Find a seat. We're just discussing the western expansion, and the role of the American Indian."

Eleanor sensed him take the seat closest to the door. His breathing was short and shallow, but even without looking, she knew he sat up straight and met the eyes of Jamesford High's sophomore class with cool regard as they no doubt sized him up.

Eleanor turned her head and, still resting it on her arms, stole a glance at David.

He hadn't seen her, or if he had, he'd already moved on to the more active stares.

He'd grown of course. Nearly six feet tall now. Big shoulders. His mop of brown hair over his pale complexion was as untamed and thick as she remembered. He had a new scar under his eye, small and well healed, but Eleanor noticed it. He had stubble and a scratch on his lip from where he'd shaved that morning.

Eleanor's hands were shaking. She realized she'd been holding her breath. She forced an exhale.

"Miss Anders," Mrs. Hart said. "I was asking you if you were paying attention."

The class released David from their stares and turned them at her.

Eleanor raised her head and let her long auburn hair frame her face like a half drawn mask. She knew her face was red, ashamed and excited. She looked at Mrs. Hart and prepared her usual, "I was just dozing off, sorry. Not enough sleep" excuse, the usual one, when in the corner of her eye she perceived a smile on David's face. It was not a malicious one like the others wore, smelling blood in the water, but a sincere and friendly one, a natural greeting to an old friend.

"You say the Indians were noble and united against the whites?" she heard herself say. "How then do you explain the Shoshone joining General Crook's army against the Lakota? They fought alongside the army at the Battle of the Rosebud which was after the Bear Creek Massacre where the army killed 500 Shoshone."

“W-what?” Mrs. Hart stammered, obviously surprised Eleanor had spoken at all let alone contradicted her.

“Before, during, and after the whites got here, these Noble Indians of yours were slaughtering each other in constant warfare. Life means little to them,” Eleanor said.

She felt the collective gasp from the entire room. She knew then that she was the only one who’d bothered with the extending reading list. It was decoration on the syllabus, meant to make the class look better than it was in an attempt to garner Mrs. Hart a raise and bring in desperately needed funding for the school.

Eleanor let her hair fall further over her face, obscuring her right side. She looked through her long bangs at her teacher like a wolf in tall grass watching prey.

“Are you being insubordinate, Miss Anders?” said the teacher.

“No, ma’am,” she said. “I just don’t think your view of the Indians is entirely accurate.” She couldn’t believe she was still speaking. This was crazy, this was attention, this was danger. Why was she doing this? Who cared what Mrs. Hart thought? Who cared what the others learned, or failed to learn in this class? Who was she to say anything? Who was she?

It was David.

An hour before, she’d have groggily nodded and accepted a low B in the class, never adding a syllable to a discussion that wasn’t short, whispered, agreeable, and forced out of her under duress. But then David walked in, and she was a different person.

“I don’t think you’re right about your facts,” Mrs. Hart said, retreating to her lectern. “And you’re definitely wrong about their respect for life and all nature.”

The class turned to follow Mrs. Hart, unsure what they’d witnessed. Robby Guide, the lone Shoshone-born student in the class, kept his gaze on Eleanor longer than the others. His eyes bored maliciously into her and she retreated behind her mask of her hair.

Mrs. Hart drew a timeline on the board and began adding dates showing the Manifest Destiny of the American Whites across the continent. Eleanor put

her head down and listened. She would not be called on again today. She turned her senses to the boy by the door.

She smelled David's sweat, deodorant, and cheap shampoo. She drank it like water and allowed herself to hope he had not changed much. But did he even remember her? And why was he back? She thought she'd never see him again, had never allowed herself to even hope to see him again.

She felt he was afraid, like her. No, not like her. He sat up straight and proud and met the eyes of the others with cool control and detachment. She would dissolve if able.

After a short break where Eleanor did not leave her seat, the class fell into English lessons, and again Mrs. Hart, enamored with her own voice, lectured the class. Eleanor kept her head on her desk and listened to the birds and the cars and David's heartbeat, and when she could not avoid it, to Mrs. Hart's interpretation of *1984*.

"I'm sorry. David, is it?" Mrs. Hart said.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, his voice breaking not from emotion but from lack of use.

"Yes, David, the class was assigned to read this book over the summer. You'll have to catch up."

"I've read it," he said.

"You have?" she said.

"Yes, last year. In school," he said.

"Where was that?" she asked.

"Augusta, Georgia. Fort Gordon," he said.

"Your father is in the army?"

"Yes, ma'am. A signalman. He's overseas now."

"Well, you might be a little ahead of us then," she said. "Feel free to contribute."

"It was an advanced class," he said, and Eleanor knew he instantly regretted saying it. "I mean, an A.P. class." It was too late. The class decided at that moment to dislike David Venn.

"Very good," Mrs. Hart said and continued with her lecture until the bell

rang sending the class to Mr. Graham for chemistry.

David presented Mr. Graham with a note from Principal Curtz and the aging teacher added his name to the roll and bade him take a seat. David found a tattered copy of the chemistry textbook on the shelf beside the college algebra and trigonometry books he'd need later that day. He took a seat in the back, behind the other students, but still not close to Eleanor, who sat even further back and isolated.

Mr. Graham plodded ahead as he had for years, wearing the same wide ties he'd owned for decades. His situation was not a secret. He should retire and wanted to, but the school district had been unable to lure another science and math teacher to northeastern Wyoming. They'd convinced Mr. Graham to stay on another year, promising to double recruitment efforts and accepting his ultimatum that no matter what, he'd hang up his chalk in June. Jamesford was a small town and what Eleanor had not learned listening to the sounds of the school, she had overheard in parking lots and at the grocery.

She liked Mr. Graham. He'd taught her the previous year and if he stayed, would teach her again next. He did not care for personality or words. He never put her on the spot, embarrassed her, or regarded her at all. He let her be as unnoticed as she wanted to be and surely wished her classmates would be as obligingly invisible as she was. He graded with numbers and percentages. Science and math were no place for opinion and so there was not even the suggestion of discussion. Lecture, demonstration, work time, test. That was chemistry, science, and math with Mr. Graham. He was beyond caring for his fourth decade of students and didn't even make an effort to learn names. If you did not ask for help, you did not receive it.

The class was so small that everyone could work alone, though only Eleanor did. The others cliqued up in groups, shared notes, and copied answers while Mr. Graham read fishing magazines and ignored the noise by turning down his hearing aid.

Last year, science was the only class in which Eleanor scored above a B on her report card. She'd made a promise to herself to correct that this year.

His back to the class, Mr. Graham began his lecture. The other students began whispering and passing notes. They could talk if they dared, hoping Mr. Graham's hearing aid was turned down as it often was. But if they got caught, he'd send them to Mr. Curtz directly. Three trips to the principal's office were an automatic one week suspension. Less than three weeks into the

new school year, Mr. Graham had already sent two students, Barbara Pennon and Russell Liddle to the office once.

She watched as David listened to Mr. Graham and studied his book, trying to locate text to match the lecture. At the end of the class, he looked lost and frustrated. The lunch bell rang.

Eleanor avoided the chicken-fried steak and used her state voucher lunch coupon for a wilted salad and warm carton of milk. She sat at her usual table, alone in the shadows.

David had remained after class to speak with Mr. Graham, but Eleanor couldn't hear them over the rush of students in the cafeteria. When he finally appeared, the cafeteria had emptied outside to enjoy the warm late summer day. David found a table near the front and ate without noticing Eleanor watching him from the corner. He had just enough time to get his meal and eat it with a soldier's speed before math began.

After math was physical education with Mr. Blake. Eleanor moved through the locker room like a ghost, unnoticed by the other girls. She found her locker and took her clothes to a dressing room for modesty. Most of the other girls had dispensed with that and changed like the boys did, in front of the others. Only Eleanor, Midge, the fat girl, and Aubrey, the girl with scars on her back, changed in the dressing rooms. The skinny girl, Penelope, changed with the others, but Eleanor thought her sickly skeletal body was more shameful by far than Midge's plump rolls. She did it to herself. Eleanor could smell bile on Penelope's breath after lunch and knew she purged in the middle-school restroom when those students were in class. She carried herself like royalty and regarded Midge with an outward contempt that frequently slipped into outright cruelty and bullying. Barbara Pennon and the other girls frequently joined in. The school was full of bullies. The town was full of bullies.

Outside, Mr. Blake had everyone run once around the track as a warm up. Eleanor was last. David had not brought gym clothes and so was excused. He sat on the bleachers with Mr. Blake's clipboard in the sunshine and Eleanor smiled for him, though no one could see it.

They split up into two co-ed soccer teams and played a game. Mr. Blake stayed in the center with his whistle, blowing frequent fouls and raising yellow cards like a World Cup referee.

It was a dumb game. No one was good at soccer. The boys wanted to play



football or basketball or be let out to the stables for rodeo training, and the girls just didn't want to be there at all. Mr. Blake was from Nicaragua where soccer was king. He taught Spanish and sports and made the kids learn the offside rule the first day of class.

Eleanor found it easy to melt away from the game and find a calm corner near the weaker goal to wait out the hour. When a ball would accidentally find its way to her, she trotted to it with grace and deftly passed it to a teammate. Mr. Blake had taken her aside once and asked her where she learned to play.

"Nowhere," she said. "I saw it on TV once."

"No kidding," he said. "If we ever get a team going, you're on it."

The next time a ball came to her, she flubbed the kick and sent the ball sailing over the fence into the parking lot.

After sports, only some of the girls showered. Penelope did, using it as another opportunity to display her deathly frame. Barbara did as well, showing off her voluptuous chest and cleaning off any perspiration before re-coating herself in perfumes. Eleanor never sweated enough to need a shower but wouldn't have showered if she did. She was an aggressively private person.

Mr. Blake was still sweaty for their Spanish class but carried on with the kind of new teacher enthusiasm Mr. Graham had jettisoned before Mr. Blake was born.

David was waiting in the classroom with Mr. Blake before the others arrived, sitting in a seat that had been empty all year.

"That's my seat," said Russell Liddle to David. "That's where I sit."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said David standing up. David was several inches taller than the freckled boy challenging him for the seat. "Mr. Blake said it was available."

"Not today," Russell said, loud enough for his friends to hear.

David took another empty seat. There were many.

The lesson was robust and mostly in Spanish. No one was very good at the language, and there was always grumbling about its usefulness. With patience, Mr. Blake would listen to the complaints and try to explain the value of a broad education, then smile, shrug, and finish the lesson anyway.

When the bell rang to end the day, the seats emptied before the sound had died. Eleanor waited for everyone to go. She watched David get up and follow the others through the door and out into the sunny afternoon. Only when he was gone, when she heard his footsteps cross the threshold out of the building did she sigh, gather her books, and leave.

## CHAPTER THREE

The school was tucked away from Highway 26, the only paved artery in or out of the town leading to other places. There was a bus Eleanor could take home but, unlike many of her classmates, she could walk home and preferred to. Many she knew, like Barbara Pennon and Robby Guide, lived nearly twenty miles away on secluded ranches in the tree cut hills. Eleanor could walk the two miles to her home faster than they could be driven in one of the town's three aging school buses.

Crossing Highway 26, Eleanor saw the usual speed trap at the town limits. Trucks and tourists slowed to admire the aggressively rustic wooden façades of a town grabbing at tourist dollars. Jamesford billed itself as the Cowboy Playground. For decades, in a hundred outdoors magazines, the chamber of commerce advertised the area's scenic wonders, spectacular fishing, abundant hunting, and authentic western experience. It had worked somewhat. Jamesford became a modest destination of its own and not just a rest stop along a lonely stretch of wild highway between Yellowstone and Cheyenne. Rich city people eager for a true western experience filled the county's eight dude ranches every summer to pay luxury prices for boiled beans, a wool blanket in a wooden shack, and the right to be woken up at dawn by a steel triangle.

Eleanor crossed the highway and made her way between two motels and a sportsman shop that promised every trout fishing device known to man. She noted the many out-of-state license plates and the smell of over-sweet barbecue from the Buffalo Cafe.

Beyond the highway, behind the façades, just a block away, Jamesford immediately transformed into just another rural Wyoming town where there were more aluminum trailer homes than actual wooden houses. Eleanor walked parallel to the highway behind the line of wood-veneered shops and hotels to avoid the traffic, and snaked her way to the bank.

The bank occupied a prime corner in town near the better artist galleries. In anticipation of the coming boom, Jamesford had attracted a certain artist class who embraced the wilderness and nature but scorned the locals. There was always an uneasy truce between the "actual residents" and the "transplants" or "hicks and civilized" depending upon which side you talked to. Many of the artists had lived in Jamesford longer than Eleanor and some of the "hicks"

had just arrived last year when Chevron sank a test well up Pony Creek Canyon.

Eleanor waited outside until the lobby was empty and then pushed her way through the glass doors. There were two tellers on duty, a man and a woman. She knew them both. Of the two, she disliked the girl less, and so approached her window.

“Hello, Miss Eleanor,” the woman said. She was in her late thirties and wore too much eyeshadow. She had a belly, but she kept it hidden below the counter, and smacked gum when her manager forgot to order her to spit it out.

“I just want to know if we got our deposit,” Eleanor said.

“Speak up, honey,” the teller said. “I can’t hear you. Don’t talk to the floor. I’m right here.”

Eleanor knew the teller had heard her even though Eleanor had spoken low and to her feet. Eleanor had never made a different request of anyone in this bank. Always she came to see if the deposit was made. Did the bank people suddenly expect her to start a mortgage or exchange Italian money? They knew her name, recognized her on sight, and yet they somehow always forgot why she came in.

It was a mild cruelty, insignificant and automatic—a small, unnecessary meanness typical of the species.

Eleanor turned her face up, careful to keep her hair draped over her eyes.

“Did our deposit come in?” she said loudly.

“I’ll just check,” the teller said, popping her gum behind a broad insincere grin.

Eleanor passed a credit card through the window, preempting an unnecessary request to see it. The teller glanced at it and then typed her account number into her computer by memory.

The male teller, a boy barely out of high school, spun circles in his chair. The manager was out.

“Well, looks like it cleared this morning,” Eleanor’s teller said. “Eighteen hundred ninety-two dollars,” she said.

“Thanks,” mumbled Eleanor and turned away.

“See you next month,” called the teller.

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